Book review: Sites of prehistoric life in Northern Ireland by Harry Welsh and June Welsh

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Deciphering the Anglo-Saxon diet

The 6th and 7th centuries in England were defined by great social change. Along with the gradual conversion to Christianity in many areas, there is also evidence for increasing social stratification, most clearly seen through the emergence of prominent princely burials such as Sutton Hoo. It seems the rich were getting richer, and the poor poorer. A new study by Emma Hannah (Queen's University Belfast) and Susanne Hakenbeck (University of Cambridge) has analysed how this upheaval may have affected diet during this period. Early Christian proscriptions involving meat suggest that, as more of the population converted, they may have become increasingly reliant on fish. At the same time, with the development of a clear social hierarchy, a distinct dietary difference between social classes may also be expected.

To address these questions, the team assessed 116 individuals from two Anglo-Saxon sites – Melbourn in Cambridgeshire and Polhill in Kent – analysing the bones for carbon and nitrogen isotopes. The results showed some slight variations in diet. For instance, at Polhill a few individuals appear to have consumed more animal protein than others, and at Melbourn fish does not appear to have been a main staple, probably due to its inland location. For the most part, however, both sites were fairly homogenous, with most individuals presenting with similar isotopic profiles. Specifically, when analysing the individuals based on their apparent wealth (as identified through burial characteristics and grave goods), although the moderately wealthy at Polhill appear to have been more meat-reliant, the overall results speak of few drastic differences that would indicate diverse diets based on social status. Similar results have also been found in other contemporaneous Anglo-Saxon communities.

Summarising these findings in their recent paper, published in *The Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports*, the researchers said, 'This perceived [dietary] uniformity reveals that food was an element of daily life which was relatively immune to drastic change and which remained largely consistent, against a backdrop of social reform. Even the extreme religious changes of the time do not appear to have influenced diet, at least not in any clear, isotopically visible way.'

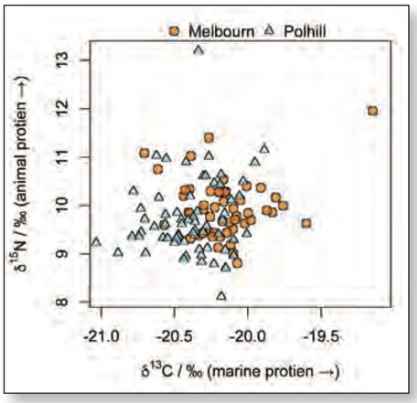

PHOTO: Emma Hannah

LEFT With the exception of a few outliers, this scatterplot shows that the majority of individuals buried in the Anglo-Saxon cemeteries of Melbourn and Polhill displayed similar isotopic profiles, indicating that the majority of the population ate a similar diet, regardless of social status.

Finds Tray

This is part of a Roman timepiece, dated *c.*AD 100-400. Made of copper alloy and found near Waterlooville, Hampshire, it is one of only four ever discovered – one excavated at Vindolanda in 2008 and the others coming from Salzburg, Austria, and Grand, France. The Vindolanda example is believed to form part of a bronze disc, estimated at around 35cm in diameter; it is thought that the Hampshire find might have been similar to this as, out of the three others, it most closely resembles that from Vindolanda. It is possible, though, that the Hampshire object is a product of a 'more formal production' because, as Dr John Pearce from King's College London notes, 'the letters... are cut as monumental serifed capitals rather than punched'.

Measuring *c.*38mm in length and 13mm in width, the artefact is marked by a line of perforations running along its whole length. Above these is the word *AVGVST* ('August'; the Vindolanda example had the word 'SEPTEMBER' on it) and below the holes are the letters *N* and *[I]D*. The *N* probably refers to the *nonae* ('ninth days'), while the *[I]D* may stand for the ides. It is believed that the holes were for keeping track of the days of the year, but the object's exact purpose is up for debate. The Vindolanda find was identified as a calendar, but it has also been suggested that it could be a clock or *horologium hibernum*; alternatively, it may have been used to predict astronomical and meteorological events. As all four timepieces display a great deal of variation in form, however, they might have all had slightly different functions.

The Hampshire calendar's PAS database entry can be found at *https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/841970*.

IMAGE: Portable Antiquities Scheme

The Portable Antiquities Scheme is an initiative, funded by the DCMS, to encourage the voluntary recording of archaeological objects found by members of the public in England and Wales. For more information on the Scheme, and to browse its database of over 1 million finds, visit *www.finds.org.uk*. Information for this find was provided by Edwin Wood, Finds Liaison Officer for Sussex.

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